


Metro Chicago held back by racial, ethnic disparities, regional plan declares

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Metropolitan Chicago's economic progress has "stalled," lagging well behind growth in other big American cities, and a major reason is economic disparity here between whites and people of color, especially African-Americans.

That's the bottom line of the 30-year blueprint for the region adopted today by the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning, a somewhat obscure but powerful agency that controls the flow of billions of dollars of federal transportation and other funds to the region. (You can read the full report at the end of this story.)

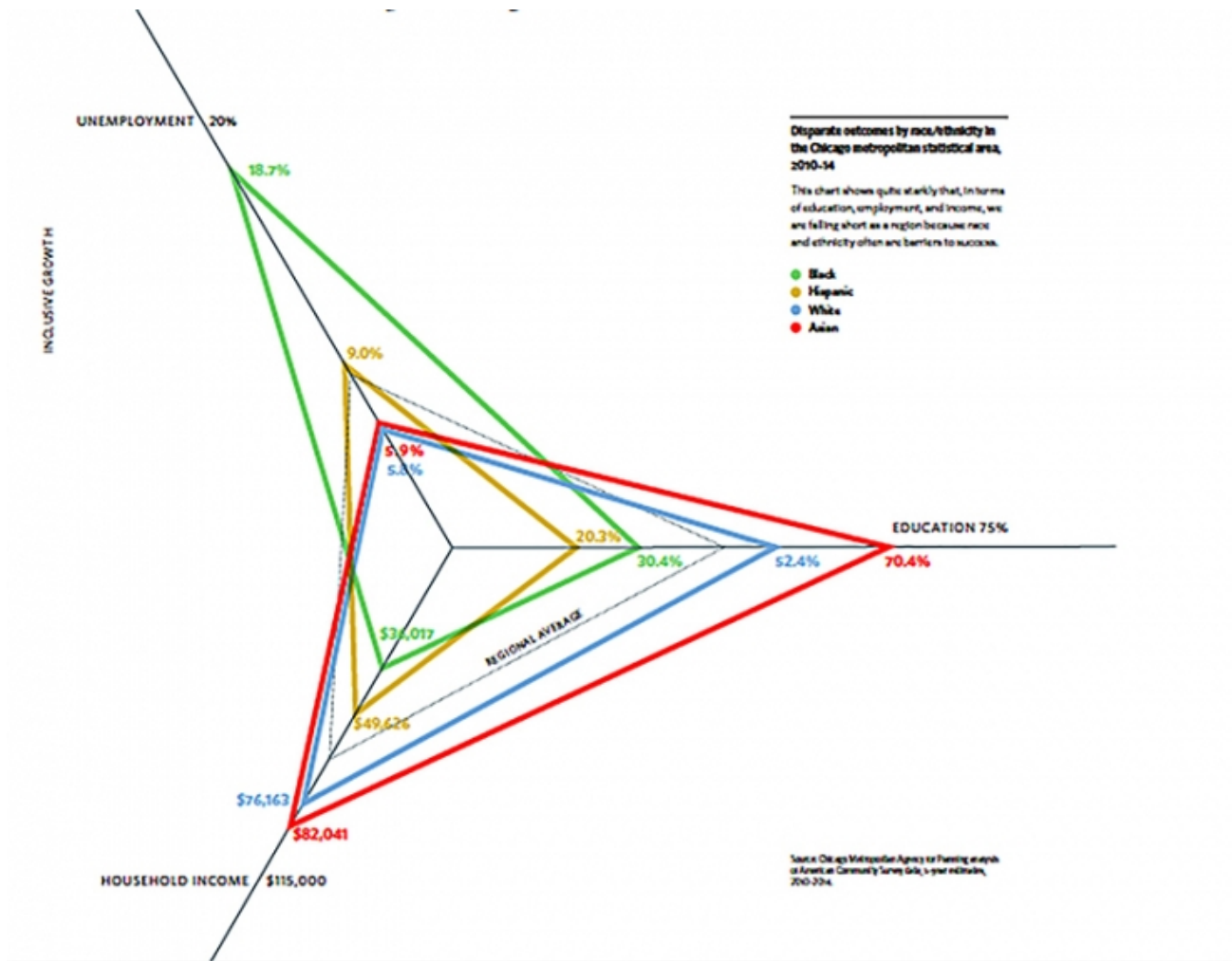
In its new "On To 2050" long-range plan, CMAP calls for or hints at all sorts of changes it thinks are needed to get a region whose population has stagnated this decade back on track. Included: more state aid to local communities for strategic investments, phasing out Cook County's property tax classification system that hits business property harder than homeowners, extending the state's sales tax to cover more services, and an emphasis on locating jobs closer to where people live.

But the core of the blueprint, especially compared to the prior On To 2040 plan, is how "we are struggling to keep up with our peers economically"—and the role that racial and ethnic inequality plays in that.

"The level of growth here has not been nearly as robust as other regions, our peer regions," said CMAP Executive Director Joe Szabo in a press briefing, pointing to findings that, since 2005, regional gross product has grown just 6.5 percent here compared to 13.5 percent in New York, 15.4 percent in Washington, D.C., 20.7 percent in Los Angeles and 22.8 percent in Boston.

A "huge" reason why, according to Szabo and CMAP: different educational and income levels both within the region and relative to other regions.

For instance, unemployment among blacks here (18.7 percent) is more than twice that among Hispanics and three times that of whites and Asians, and while income disparity between whites and blacks trails that of some other cities such as San Francisco, only Detroit among 25 U.S. cities studied has as high an African-American unemployment rate as the Chicago area.



"Metropolitan Chicago simply cannot thrive when so many people and places are left behind," says the plan's executive summary, echoing a similar conclusion reached last year by the Metropolitan Planning Council. "Despite our numerous enviable assets, we fall short of ensuring economic opportunity for all residents. Though also true of many other regions, this unfortunate reality is particularly evident here."

CMAP's solution to that is many-pronged, and notably emphasizes a need for "prioritized investments" rather than the tax cuts that many political conservatives consider crucial.

Szabo waved off a suggestion that the plan is too quick to call for spending money, noting that it urges local governments to become more efficient via items such as joint purchasing and even mergers.

But the fact is that investment is crucial, the report says, contending that the region needs \$24 billion in additional resources by 2050 just to maintain its transportation networks and another \$27 billion for desirable improvements.

CMAP and sister agencies need to prioritize that spending, rather than participating in a political free-for-all, the report suggests. Also needed: "coordinated land use planning and appropriate pricing for roads and parking."

As previously reported, the report also includes CMAP's final list of priority projects it wants to get federal funding.

Included are completion of the Elgin/O'Hare Expressway; addition of managed toll lanes to I-55, I-80 and I-290; the rebuilding of portions of the Chicago Transit Authority's Blue and Red lines and extension of the latter to the southern city limits; and several extensions of Metra service.

The plan was officially adopted this morning by the CMAP board and its policy committee, and represents the group's official policy for the region's seven Illinois counties and 284 communities.

CMAP also announced grants of \$500,000 and \$200,000 from the MacArthur Foundation and Chicago Community Trust, respectively, to allow it to give technical assistance to smaller communities that lack the resources to develop their own plans.